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What can be achieved through education at all? A response to Julian Culp

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ARTICLE



What can be achieved through education at all? A response to Julian Culp

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ABSTRACT

In the following I would like to expose Julian Culp's normative argumentation to some empirical considerations. My commentary focuses on one of the central premises of the book: Culp assumes that education can make a decisive contribution to solving the current challenges in plural and globalized societies. He states that recent political philosophy has unacceptably neglected the issue of education. But the book's aim is not the theoretical determination of education itself. Rather, Culp is concerned with the question of giving education the right normative foundation to solve the social, ecological and democratic challenges the globalized world is currently facing. I don't think that one can or should discuss and analyse education without normative considerations. Educational thinking cannot do without a normative foundation and it is helpful and necessary to reflect upon them philosophically. This is the central concern of the book, and there is nothing to be added to it by historians or educational researchers. But a purely normative approach runs the risk of repeating many of the problems inherent in educational thinking. I think that even a normative approach would gain a lot from taking the empirical and historical boundaries of its subject more seriously than Culp does. Therefore, most of my remarks are about the relationship between normative theory and historical realities.

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In the following I would like to expose Julian Culp's normative argumentation to some empirical considerations. I argue from the perspective of a historian of education. So, my empirical data are historical phenomena and developments.

My commentary focuses on one of the central premises of the book: Culp assumes that education can make a decisive contribution to solving the current challenges in plural and globalized societies. He states that recent political philosophy has unacceptably neglected the issue of education.

But the book's aim is not the theoretical determination of education itself. Rather, Culp is concerned with the question of giving education the right normative foundation to solve the social, ecological and democratic challenges the globalized world is

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currently facing. He is convinced that ‘there are several real world problems that can be neither properly grasped nor adequately resolved without engaging in the kind of political philosophy of education and philosophy of political education’ (p. 182) which is discussed in the book. On a more practical note, he concludes, for example, that the rise of right-wing populist parties could have been prevented by courageous and well-founded transnational citizenship education (p. 186).

The question of the extent to which education is an appropriate means to this end remains surprisingly underexposed in the book. In my view, this is due to the normative approach, which stands in the way of an analytical clarification of what education actually is and can be.

I don’t think that one can or should discuss and analyse education without normative considerations. Educational thinking cannot do without a normative foundation and it is helpful and necessary to reflect upon them philosophically. This is the central concern of the book, and there is nothing to be added to it by historians or educational researchers. But a purely normative approach runs the risk of repeating many of the problems inherent in educational thinking. I think that even a normative approach would gain a lot from taking the empirical and historical boundaries of its subject more seriously than Culp does.

Therefore, most of my remarks are about the relationship between normative theory and historical realities.

The two meanings of educational impact

Before I start with some historical reflections, I would first like to make a distinction that I consider to be very central when discussing what can be achieved through education. They might be called the ‘Adam Smith approach’ and the ‘John Dewey approach’. Adam Smith (2002) produced his first major work, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, before becoming the forefather of modern economics. Naturally, the book deals not only with social psychology, rather, many of the examples Smith uses touch on educational issues. In the book, Smith tries to answer the question of how man, as a fundamentally selfish being, is nevertheless capable of something like ‘sympathy’. In contrast to his second major work, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, he refers not only to public or private schooling here, but talks about educational phenomena in a much more fundamental way.

According to Smith, mercy and compassion are not learned as virtues later in life, but are acquired in the original education, when growing up, in the family environment. We cannot experience the feelings of others ourselves, but we can put ourselves in their situation. So we consider what the situation of another person would mean for us. This applies to sorrow as well as to joy. Rather incidentally, we also form general rules through our observations – we see how others disapprove of certain actions. In this way, general rules of morality are formed. These must then only become a habit.

Even the affection found within the family is, from this perspective, the product of a habituation process. However, Smith does not trust schools and universities to do much in this context. The entire formation of sympathy happens in concentric circles around the family and in the immediate natural environment. In other areas of social

life, such processes of mutual social stimulation are only conceivable to a limited extent and are much more preconditioned.

The counter-programme is represented by John Dewey. With an immensely broad concept of education (Dewey 2002), covering a wide spectrum from socialization and experience to teaching and group interaction, Dewey wants education to transform society. To him in his time, education itself was already becoming the mode in which social change was taking place. Dewey was certainly not a member of the technocratic faction of progressivism which would be much more successful in the long run (Labaree 2010b), and he was certainly not one of the ‘illiberal reformers’ that Thomas C. Leonard (2016) has studied. But for Dewey and for all his fellow progressives, education has the function of initiating and sustaining comprehensive social change. The goal here is democracy as an equal ‘social intercourse’, which should already take place in the classroom.

My aim here is not to defend Smith’s radical criticism of schools, which historically was aimed at a completely different educational system. Nor is it my intention to ask whether Smith’s beliefs in the positive impact of families is perhaps a little bit too optimistic. Rather, my argument is about the fact that education, in Smith’s view, is not first an instrument that can be used for a specific purpose but is nevertheless an immensely powerful institution.

Like Smith, Dewey believes in the power of education. However, while Smith in his early work on moral philosophy (a discussion of Smith’s educational thought in the entire work would have to be somewhat more differentiated) does not assume that education should be placed in the service of a higher cause, but is more concerned with how to guarantee the rudimentary social routines of a liberal society, Dewey’s educational program is intended to help create community through constant communicative intercourse. I think that, in educational terms, Dewey is more part of the problem than part of the solution, and that when it comes to questions of education, it is worth trusting, like Smith, in the incidental and unexpected results of educational efforts as opposed to making them the centre of social or economic reform.

Culp explicitly places himself in the Dewey camp. From Dewey, he takes the idea that the ‘philosophy of education’ is ‘only an explicit formulation of the problems of the formation of right mental and moral habitudes in respect to the difficulties of contemporary social life’ (Dewey 1980, 341). The current problem that Culp wants to solve with a comprehensive normative foundation of education is the global challenge. For this purpose, a ‘transnational democratic conscientization’ seems to be needed, a ‘formation of global consciousness’ (pp. 109–111).

A historical view on urgent calls for education reforms

Perhaps somewhat inappropriate in a philosophical context, I understand normative interventions, how elaborate they may be, as statements by historical actors. I wonder what significance normative statements about education had in history and what conclusions can be drawn from them for an explicitly normative theory of education.

One of the strengths of Culp’s contribution, in my view, is its clear opposition to a functionalist justification of democratic education. Culp states that functionalist conceptions ‘merely aim at facilitating the reproduction of the given cultural, economic

and political orders, which already have been globalized, rather than attempting to change these orders in light of normative ideas about global justice' (p. 10). He questions the 'assumption that education necessarily stabilizes the existing social order' (p. 27).

Culp admits, of course, that education as a concrete cultural activity can have an instrumental character, but he questions whether educational public policy can also be legitimized in this way. In a narrower sense, he also questions attempts to legitimize educational public policies through the goals of human capital formation or personal autonomy. Both approaches, either practically or theoretically dominant, seem to lack the necessary scope. It is for this reason that he turns to a specific conception of justice from which democratic education can only be justified.

All the varieties of a public educational policy that Culp discusses and criticizes can be found in the history of education. Of course, there are straight functionalist approaches that want to put schools entirely at the service of a functioning economy or technological development (Oliver 2004; Teixeira 20140; Bürgi 2019). But there are also functionalist approaches that want to fight poverty by means of education (Silver and Silver 1991), to advocate greater sensitivity to questions of social diversity – Amy Gutmann (1995) speaks of 'mutual respect' – or use education to guarantee a more sustainable lifestyle (Kass 2018).

In the history of education, human capital formation and personal autonomy as educational goals have often been the starting point for comprehensive educational programmes, but also for the development of concrete pedagogical instruments. I would argue, however, that there were also approaches which, like Culp, were based on a more global conception of democratic education. In particular, actors who worked closely with UNESCO preferred such a so-called humanist concept of lifelong education until the 1970s and sometimes beyond (Elfert 2016).

'So what?' one could ask. I think that these historically existing strategies of justification give rise to a series of questions that I would like to put to Julian Culp. First, in the history of education, it can be observed that a specific justification does not necessarily result in a concrete policy. In fact, diverging justification strategies can lead to the same approaches. For example, a functionalist justification that wants to stimulate the labour market can coincide with gender or migration policy concerns. In a coalition of interests, a joint program of very different camps emerges which justify this agenda differently in each case.

Second, the historians David Tyack and Larry Cuban have repeatedly shown how progressive educational reforms in the 20th century failed time and again. The catalogue of measures therefore seemed to make sense against the background of the justification for the project, but the results were not as expected. In particular, educational reformers tend to underestimate not only the inertia of the system, Tyack and Tobin (1994) speak of a 'grammar of schooling', but also the wisdom of practice and the importance of functioning routines in school life (Cuban 1984; Tyack and Cuban 1995).

Third, no matter how well-founded public policies may be, they cannot prevent education from being perceived as a positional good. David Labaree has repeatedly criticized the resulting 'credentials race', most clearly in his book *Someone Has to Fail*. Labaree does not justify the fierce cut-throat competition between formally equally qualified employees, but rather criticizes the well-meaning education policy

that this system has brought forth in the first place. The warning that an expansion of higher education would be accompanied by increased competition among graduates from academia and a devaluation of vocational certificates was usually only voiced by conservative commentators who wanted to preserve the hierarchical society.

My point is that while education can be justified on the basis of a theory of justice, it does not escape the problem that education is one of the most important instruments for stabilizing a hierarchical social order. Thus, on an individual level, education serves those who are concerned about their own career or the social advancement of their children. This can only be broken up to a limited extent in terms of education policy, since the next mode is quickly developed within the privileged population, only to then set itself apart from the rest.

Normative approaches and empirical considerations

This brings me to my final point. I no longer believe that education is the place to discuss questions of social or even global justice. It goes without saying that everything should be done to ensure that opportunities to participate in education do not depend on residence, property, citizenship or gender. However, the decisive factors for broader participation in education are not initially or solely to be found in educational public policy.

In comparative research on the history of education, a concept has been intensively discussed in recent decades that speaks of an ‘educationalisation of social problems’ (Depaepe and Smeyers 2008). What is meant by this is a transformation of social tasks into problems that schools have to solve. Thus, with the implementation of compulsory schooling, new tasks were delegated to the school time and again, such as gender equality, social justice, peace, sustainable management, diversity and so on. But teachers are already busy teaching students reading, writing and arithmetic, as well as history, geography or science. They work in social conditions, which they may be able to counter moderately in their work, but which they cannot overcome.

In view of the rich historical experience with normatively charged educational reforms, it seems to me necessary to conclude from the impact that education can have, that it cannot simply be steered politically in the desired direction. Instead, ponderous structures, necessary routines, parental decisions and numerous contextual factors must be taken into account as well. Education is an extremely powerful social institution, but its use, at least collectively, is limited. It is also dependent on several other factors, which in turn cannot be changed directly through education. There is a danger that economic inequality, global injustice, gender discrimination, lack of productivity or technological innovation will simply be reinterpreted as an educational problem and other more important actions will not be considered. Nor should we underestimate the resistance that best intentions can provoke – and what the consequences are. For example, Michelle Nickerson has shown how resistance to the introduction of progressive and cosmopolitan educational programs in the Los Angeles region has fostered the emergence of a neo-conservative movement within the Republican Party. Only an educational reform aimed at a global perspective was able

to mobilize enough people, in Nickerson's case the conservative housewives, and press them into political activism (Nickerson 2012).

Even if I do not fully share the conclusions of Danielle Allen's essay on education and equality, I agree with her that it makes sense, to think more about what education can really achieve. Allen is totally right to point out that the many policy proposals lack an adequate analytical foundation. However, she does not attempt to provide a normative foundation first, but rather develops, with Hannah Arendt, an approach to how education itself can be thought of in terms of form and content. Allen rightly suggests that first it should be clarified how education relates to the normative program for which it is intended to be a solution. She asks, in her case regarding the issue of equality, whether there is actually an intrinsic link to education (Allen 2016).

Allen acknowledges that, in addition to the intrinsic link between the issue at stake and education, socioeconomic factors must also be considered. I would like to add to these traditions, structures, routines and path dependencies. Education has always fulfilled a number of functions and is socially embedded in a certain way. This must also be considered analytically when it comes to clarifying what role education should play in solving social or even global problems. These include the political economy of skill formation (Durazzi 2019), the role of education as a positional good (Adnett and Davies 2002), and the specific cultural or even national tradition of educational discourse (Biesta 2012; Horlacher 2016).

In my view, the central question is not what contribution a normatively founded education can make to this or that problem. Rather, it is much more important to understand education as a public good whose form and function can be determined democratically. Politics then has the task of making offers on how the public good can continue to be guaranteed. In her intellectual history of political liberalism, Katrina Forrester (2019) has impressively demonstrated how political philosophy has settled itself in a normative postwar consensus. The ideal worlds for which Rawls had made a congenial analytical offer prevented theory from contributing anything to the pressing problems of the time. At a time when deregulation, the rise of the service economy, and a fundamental structural change were taking place, political philosophy established itself in an ideal world based on full employment, a developed welfare state and expansion of education as the normal case which just had to be defended in analytical terms.

I cannot even imagine which global institutions should enforce the form of education Culp proposes. Of course, the educational organizations related to the UN or other supranational and transnational actors could deal more with the problems of a global society. I'm just not sure whether awareness education should really be the first priority and whether other issues are not much more urgent here; after all, one should not overestimate the power of these institutions. Policy continues to take place to a large extent within defined territories with mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion. The fact that this has been recognized as problematic (Nussbaum 2006) does not alter the problem that this is a reality in which education policy in particular must be implemented.

I would therefore argue less for the implementation of a global form of citizenship education and more for taking the struggle for an appropriate alignment of general and specific education more seriously again. In this context, the different normative

assumptions must be critically examined. Education always transcends the present, especially in its anticipated form. But it is also conditioned by the context in which it occurs, which must be considered both analytically and normatively. Education is embedded in a whole bundle of structural, cultural and political conditions, which in my view must be reflected more strongly in a democratic philosophy of education than is often the case.

In my view, a transnational or global approach to education reform fails to recognize the challenges we are currently facing. The multiple conditionalities of education mean that a democratic policy must take local needs into account. A normative theory that does not reflect this might miss the actual problem. The struggle for education as a public good that allows political and economic participation for all inhabitants of a territory happens locally. For poor countries and neglected world regions, however, the solution lies not first and foremost in a transnational awareness education, but in economic policies that enable these states to provide their population with the education and training they need. In a first step, the problem of global educational justice is therefore not an educational one. If these are ensured, the question that arises in rich and poor countries alike is this: How can we ensure that education remains a public good? And how can such a policy of public education be normatively justified under today's conditions? My plea for the next book thus goes in the direction of paying greater attention to these historical or empirical conditionalities. I think that at least most of us agree that education should not be founded on functionalism alone, and that questions of justice must be taken into account in this context. However, historical research has shown more than once that it seems unlikely that persistent and long-lasting educational mechanisms, which are also closely linked to structures outside the school system, can be challenged by good arguments. It is rather the contexts that need to be changed first.

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